

## Parish Nurse Newsletter – March, 2010

*“To forgive is to set a prisoner free and discover that the prisoner was you!”*

Lewis B. Smedes

In the past week: how many times did someone ask you for your forgiveness? How many times did you forgive?

Forgiving can be as simple as smiling at someone who says ‘I’m sorry’ when they inadvertently bump into you in the grocery line or as agonizing as being able to be present in the same room with the person who made you lose your job, or stole your boyfriend, or tarnished your reputation, or worse yet, abused you.

Our concepts of forgiveness – when to forgive and when not to forgive, how to forgive and how not to forgive, are often shaped by our own childhood examples, our church’s teachings, and by circumstances and experiences in our adult lives. For some of us, forgiveness is the right thing to do and so no matter what has occurred to us or others, we feel it is our moral responsibility to immediately forgive and forget. After all, Scripture is full of verses that command us to forgive; Jesus forgave even those who crucified him. So we grit our teeth, smile, pretend we forgive and move on.

Others of us have lived in households where fear and pride get in the way of acknowledging hurt and where the only response to that hurt is to either lash out in anger or let that hurt settle into the bones where bitterness brews.

Many of us are somewhere in between those extremes. But wherever we are in our understanding of forgiveness, we all know the sting of insult, the hurt of verbal, emotional, or possibly physical abuse, the pain of neglect or abandonment – we’ve all been wounded and deep down we know the desire for healing and reconciliation.

Parish nurses and pastors often come in contact with people stymied in their forgiveness process. We see first hand the effects that this has on their emotional development, their spiritual maturity and their physical well-being.

A person who is unable to forgive or even unaware of his/her need to forgive, can become **emotionally crippled**. They get lost in a maze of recalling and rehearsing. Their emotional energy is spent on recalling the hurtful words or actions and rehearsing vindictive paybacks. They may surround themselves with friends and family who support them in their anger and hurt, reinforcing their right to be bitter.

On the other hand, they may withdraw into their own bitter world, shutting others out, nursing their wounds, convinced that no one else can understand their pain. The wound/hurt becomes bigger than them to the point where it begins to dominate their life. Every day frustrations and challenges become overwhelming because there is so little energy left to meet them. The hurt dictates places they can go, people they can be with, and businesses they will buy from, churches they will attend, and on and on and on. They begin to see life through suspicious eyes, wary of being hurt again. Their emotional energy runs along a single track, totally missing the full-orbed variety of emotions that God has created.

Frederick Beuchner, known author, pastor and professor, states, “Of the seven deadly sins, anger is possibly the most fun. To lick your wounds, to smack your lips over grievances long past, to roll over your tongue the prospect of bitter confrontations yet to come, to savor to the last toothsome morsel both the pain you are given and the pain you are giving back – in many ways it is a feast fit for a king. The chief drawback is that what you are wolfing down is yourself. The skeleton at the feast is you.”

In a similar way, an unforgiving person's **spirit is shriveled**. God's presence doesn't feel real. Prayer, if there is any, focuses on seeking revenge on enemies and deliverance from evil people. There's no room for gratitude for God's gifts or thankfulness for everyday pleasures. A sense of self-righteousness permeates their attitudes towards others – it's impossible to love their perpetrator and it's difficult to have compassion for the weaknesses of others. There's little time or energy to care for someone else in need. The longer the bitterness and resentment last, the harder it is to embrace grace and hope.

And finally, the **physical body also suffers** from an unforgiving spirit. In the book, "Forgiving Myself: Disharming My Inner Terrorists", Noel Frederick McInnis states that unforgiveness:

- distresses my central nervous system
- stresses my circulatory system
- stresses my muscular-skeletal system
- stresses my glandular (endocrine and lymphatic) systems
- depresses my immune system

In an article by Julia McNamee Neenan, HealthScout Reporter, "Burying the Hatchet Can be Good for your Health", listed on the "HealingWell.com website, Julia quotes Dr. Charlotte vanOyen Witvliet, a psychology professor at Hope College in Holland, Michigan, "When people focused on unforgiving thoughts, often they felt more physical stress and more negative emotions". Julia goes on to describe a research study conducted by Dr. Witvliet. "Researchers asked 71 college students to recall a situation in which someone hurt them. They then assessed how their bodies reacted as the participants spent two hours seesawing between imagery sessions involving unforgiveness and forgiveness. Each session lasted about 16 seconds and ended with a relaxation period.

"During the unforgiveness sessions, the participants rehearsed the hurt they'd experienced, meaning they replayed the events and their feelings like a movie. They also practiced harboring a grudge, Witvliet says. The script, she says, read, 'Think about how unfair it was for this person to hurt you and how you'd like them to feel bad about it.' The students' heart rates rose from a baseline of 1.75 beats every four seconds to nearly three beats during the rehearsal sessions, the study says, and to 2.6 when they harbored grudges. Similarly blood pressure rose 2.5 mm/Hg in a four-second period when the students either rehearsed the hurtful experience or harbored grudges."

Julia goes on to quote Everett Worthington, head of the psychology department at Virginia Commonwealth University and executive director of the nonprofit Campaign for Forgiveness Research. "It's (unforgiving) going to **increase your risk factors for cardiovascular problems and stress-related disorders.**" According to Julia, Everett Worthington says that "his own research shows that people in happy marriages have much lower levels of cortisol than those in unhappy marriages. Cortisol is a hormone activated by stress, and higher levels of cortisol would produce the kind of heart rate and blood pressure changes Witvliet found, he says. **If you're unforgiving, you're in a constant state of desiring change, and that's stressful, Worthington says.** Unforgiveness also includes resentment, bitterness, hostility, hatred, anger and fear – all of which are stressful, he says."

In his book, Forgive and Forget – Healing the Hurts We don't Deserve, Lewis Smedes, renowned Christian author, ethicist, and theologian outlines the 4 basic steps in the process of forgiveness:

- Acknowledge the hurt (*don't minimize it, don't explain it away, don't bury it*)
- Blame the person who hurt you (*either directly to that person, or indirectly*)
- Surrender the right to get even
- Begin to reverse your feelings until you are able to wish the other person good.

It's crucial to remember that **forgiveness is a process** and that it may take many years to work through the process. The steps of forgiveness may not occur in chronological order and you may find

yourself having to repeat a step(s) many times before you have worked through all of the emotional and spiritual issues i.e. before you find rest and peace.

***“He that cannot forgive others breaks the bridge over which he must pass himself;  
for every man has need to be forgiven.”***

**George Herbert**

I have found personally that the only way forgiveness is possible is if I confess to God that both the desire to forgive and the ability to forgive are not within my own power. It's when I humbly admit that God must begin to work a miracle in my heart, that I can begin the process of forgiveness.



Beyond the healing power of forgiveness, lies the hope of reconciliation. Although reconciliation is not always possible, if it occurs, it restores relationship and in time past hurts can be replaced by the joy of renewing fellowship with another human being and God.

***“You forgive somebody and you begin to dance instead of wallow. You begin to walk with God. You set a prisoner free and you discover the prisoner you set free was you.”***

**Lewis Smedes**

Forgiveness and reconciliation is a powerful and meaningful process between two human beings. This process is even more enriching when it restores relationship with our Lord. My hope and prayer for each of you is that you know the relief of forgiveness and the joy of forgiveness, both with other humans and with God and that you are able to help others walk this journey.



Recommended:

Forgive and Forget – Healing the Hurts We Don't Deserve by Lewis Smedes

The Art of Forgiving by Lewis Smedes

Shame and Grace by Lewis Smedes

Wrestling with Angels, An Intimate Look at the Tough questions of Life, a Video Production of Trinity Television, The Parish of Trinity Church, New York City. Producer: Linda Hanick and executive Producer: Jeff Weber. Published by Zondervan Publishing House.